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U.S. SUPPORT FOR PLAN COLOMBIA: AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH

By

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The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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U.S. policy makers should recognize that the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC), the Army of National Liberation (ELN), and right-wing paramilitary groups present the greatest obstacle to achieving democracy and stability in Colombia. Successfully negotiating with or combating these organizations will require a more professional, capable Colombian military. U.S. support efforts should focus on assisting Colombia with developing this force. The U.S. should use the successful operations in El Salvador in the 1980's as a model for assisting Colombia. Assigning training teams to selected Colombian military and CNP units to facilitate training programs, assist in planning operations, and monitor respect for human rights would greatly improve the effectiveness of U.S. support. Finally, the U.S. should develop and implement a more coherent interagency and combined regional strategy for coping with drug trafficking. Adoption of these measures would greatly improve the probability of achieving U.S. counter-drug policy objectives.

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The U.S. \$1.3 billion support package for "Plan Colombia" is a positive sign of our commitment to stabilizing Colombia's faltering democracy and reducing the flow of illegal drugs into our nation. However, to have a reasonable chance of success, the support plan needs significant modification. Drug interdiction efforts in Colombia, must first be preceded by the government regaining control of its sovereign territory and strengthening its civil institutions.

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Introduction

In January 2000, the United States Government increased its efforts to combat illegal drug trafficking by approving a 1.3 billion-dollar aid package to Colombia. The aid package, designed to support Colombian President Pastrana's "Plan Colombia", makes this country the third largest recipient of U. S. foreign aid behind Israel and Egypt.¹ "Plan Colombia" is that nation's strategy to regain control of its sovereign territory, end longstanding violence and corruption, and build an effective democracy. "The centerpiece of President Pastrana's strategy to end the civil war, repair the economy, and terminate the drug trade is a negotiated peace pact with the Marxist guerrillas actively involved in the drug trade."² The 1.3 billion-dollar U.S. aid package complements this plan by assisting with fighting the illegal drug trade, instituting judicial reform, protecting human rights, expanding economic development, and fostering the peace process.³

However, the primary U.S. policy objective is to reduce the flow of illegal drugs from Colombia into the United States; the bulk of the aid package is directed towards drug interdiction. Colombia produces 80 percent of the cocaine and two-thirds of the heroin that enters the United States. In 1999, approximately 14,000 U.S. lives were lost due to the use of these drugs.⁴ U.S. support for drug interdiction efforts focuses on providing training and equipment for the Colombian Army's (COLAR) three newly formed counter-narcotics battalions and Colombian National Police (CNP) counter-narcotics units. The principal mission of these units is combating drug trafficking activities in Colombia. Aid to these units includes funding for procurement and maintenance of 16 UH-60 Blackhawk helicopters and almost 45 UH-1H Huey

helicopters, as well as weapons, communications systems and other equipment.⁵ U.S. military personnel will also provide extensive counter-drug training to COLAR counter-narcotics battalions and the CNP.

Although this unprecedented aid package demonstrates a strong U. S. commitment to stemming the flow of illegal drugs into the country, it is unlikely to succeed unless modified and expanded in scope. Before any effective drug interdiction efforts are possible in Colombia, the government must first regain control of its sovereign territory and strengthen its civil institutions. Attempts to control criminal activities in the absence of these conditions are bound to fail. U.S. officials should recognize the fact that Marxist guerrillas, the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC), the Army of National Liberation (ELN), and right-wing paramilitary organizations pose the greatest threat to Colombia's democracy and stability. Any successful plan to control criminal drug trafficking must also address resolving conflict with these groups. Successfully negotiating with or combating these organizations will require more than COLAR counter-narcotics units and the CNP. U.S. efforts should include assisting Colombia with reforming, equipping, training, and professionalizing its entire military, not just selected units. Additionally, the U.S. should assign trainers to selected Colombian military and CNP units to evaluate operational performance, facilitate training programs, assist in planning operations and monitor respect for human rights. Finally, the U.S. should develop and implement a more coherent interagency and combined regional strategy for coping with drug trafficking. Adoption of these measures, would greatly improve the chances of success for U.S. supported drug interdiction measures.

Deficiencies in Current U.S. Support for Plan Colombia

In Colombia, the FARC, ELN and paramilitary organizations are preventing the establishment of stability, law and order. According to David Passage, former U.S. State Department, Director of Andean Affairs, Latin American Bureau, "If the U.S. is serious about achieving a reduction in the production of, and trafficking in illegal narcotics, it needs to accept the fact that no reduction is likely until the Colombian government regains control of its national territory and is able to deal with narcotrafficking on the basis of law."⁶

The FARC and ELN together comprise approximately 25,000 combatants, control more than 40 percent of the land mass, and exercise significant influence over 57 percent of the 1,071 municipalities in Colombia.⁷ These organizations have expanded significantly since the 1980's owing principally to the lucrative and stable financing of their activities provided through the drug trade. The FARC and ELN finance their activities by taxing production and transport of cocaine in areas under their control. Estimates of guerrilla revenues provided through the drug trade are as high as \$500-600 million annually.⁸ Other revenues are derived from kidnapping, extortion, cattle rustling and auto theft.

The paramilitary organizations, originally established to combat communist guerrillas, also tax the drug trade and were responsible for 76 percent of the human rights violations reported in Colombia in 1999.⁹ More than 35,000 people have been killed in Colombia's civil war in the past decade. The rate of killing far exceeds the amount of ethnic cleansing that occurred following the breakup of Yugoslavia.¹⁰

To further complicate matters, most of the territory in southern and eastern Colombia, where most of the cocoa leaves are grown, is under FARC control. Reestablishment of government control over these regions is a requirement to ensure successful eradication and interdiction efforts and implementation of alternative crop programs.

Assisting Colombia in the reestablishment of control over its national territory will require a reform of its military, particularly the Army. The Colombian Armed Forces have proved incapable of defeating the FARC and ELN or of controlling the paramilitary groups. Although the Colombian military numbers 116,000 men, only 30,000 are actively involved in combating guerrillas.¹¹ Further, these forces are composed of poorly trained, inadequately equipped conscripts organized for conventional style warfare.

Additionally, Colombia's military has a policy of exempting high school graduates from combat duty.¹² This policy ensures that members of the poor, uneducated sectors of society bear the bulk of the casualties in the civil war. Filling the ranks of combat units with largely uneducated soldiers greatly hinders the ability to develop small unit leaders capable of exercising initiative and independent action. Another problem is that Colombian conscripts serve on active duty for only 18 months. This short-term service obligation makes it exceedingly difficult to develop a highly trained, professional force capable of dealing with the nation's formidable internal threats. The Colombian Army is also hindered by a poor human rights record and is accused of supporting, or at least tacitly approving of paramilitary activities. These factors to a great extent account for the Colombian government's current inability to effectively deal with its internal security problems.

President Pastrana is attempting to negotiate a peaceful settlement to the civil war with these organizations. Such a settlement is highly unlikely under current conditions. It is doubtful because the FARC and ELN are growing in strength and may feel that time is on their side and that they have nothing to gain from a negotiated peace. As Frederick the Great observed, "Diplomacy without arms is like music without instruments." It seems obvious that a reformed, strengthened Colombian military force is required to either defeat the guerrillas on the battlefield or force them to negotiate for peace. Current U.S. support to Colombia does not address the military reform issue.¹³ Instead it focuses on training and equipping only a few units, most notably the COLAR's newly formed counter-narcotics battalions and the Colombian National Police (CNP). While this support is likely to have a positive short-term effect on interdicting the drug trade, it will not adequately address the deeper, long-term problems faced by the Colombian government.

Another shortcoming of the current U.S. support package is that it allows U.S. military personnel to conduct only initial training for COLAR counter-narcotics units. After receiving U.S. provided equipment and training, these units conduct independent operations with no U.S. oversight. This provides no method for accurately evaluating the performance of these units during actual counter-drug operations. It is analogous to teaching a 16 year-old to drive and then immediately turning him loose in an expensive, high-performance sports car on a crowded freeway. U.S. personnel closely monitoring the activities and performance of previously trained units could provide candid feedback on the effectiveness of Colombian counter-drug operations and invaluable assistance in improving future operations.

Finally, the large U.S. support package provides generous aid for Colombia but only limited aid to neighboring countries. This policy indicates a less than coherent approach to the drug problem. Narcotics trafficking and guerrilla activities are spilling over into Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru, Brazil and Panama. As pressure on drug traffickers is increased in Colombia, it seems likely that drug trafficking will flow increasingly into these neighboring nations. This displacement of criminal activity could have a serious destabilizing effect on the region. Regional destabilization, besides weakening fragile South American democracies, also affects U.S. economic interests. U.S. businesses have more than \$10 billion invested in Colombia alone. Additionally, Colombia and Venezuela combined provide 20 percent of America's crude oil supply.¹⁴ Despite these facts, there currently exists no comprehensive regional interagency counter-drug strategy. U.S. Southern Command has a theater engagement plan that focuses military activities on drug producing countries of the Andean Ridge in support of U.S. country teams. The Department of State and other U.S. agencies involved in counter-drug operations however, approach the problem on a country-by-country basis with little regional cooperation or oversight. Each Ambassador and U.S. country team develops a counter-drug plan for their respective country. Lack of coordination between country teams in development of these plans leads to a lack of unity of effort, prioritization of resources, and synchronization of operations at the regional level. Since the Ambassador of each country is a representative of the President, and answers to him through the Secretary of State, there is no direct, authoritative control of these operations at the regional level.

Recommended Modifications to U.S. Support Efforts

"Washington has decided to support Colombia's counter-narcotics effort. Yet counter-narcotics cannot be separated from counter-insurgency. Unless the Colombian

and U.S. governments implement a coherent and holistic strategy that deals with both, the situation will become worse.

*Gabriel Marcella, Former International Affairs Advisor to the Commander in Chief, U.S. Southern Command*¹⁵

To effectively address the drug trafficking problem in Colombia, the U.S. Government (USG) must first recognize that it is part of a deeper, more fundamental problem. Current measures aimed specifically at reducing drug trafficking while ignoring the root causes of Colombia's lawlessness and instability are likely to fail. Despite investing more than ten years and millions of dollars of aid to Colombia's counter narcotics police forces, we have seen narcotics production in Colombia expand, not shrink.¹⁶ A major contributing factor to this increase in production is the symbiotic relationship that has developed between the narcotraffickers and the FARC, ELN and paramilitary groups. The current stalemate that exists between the Colombian Armed Forces and the communist guerrillas and paramilitaries can only be broken by greatly improving the capabilities of the Colombian military. Only a strong military force will be capable of defeating the insurgents and paramilitaries on the battlefield or compelling them to negotiate for peace.

To accomplish this, the Colombian military must be reformed. Colombian reform efforts should focus on the military as a whole, while U.S. aid should target organizing, equipping and training units with counter-drug and counter-insurgency missions. U.S. officials should strongly pressure Colombia to change its policy of exempting high school graduates from combat assignments. This would create a more equitable sharing of the burden of Colombia's civil war among the population, and force Colombian middle and upper classes to actively seek resolution of the crisis. It would also create a more

trainable force and provide a higher quality population of potential junior leaders. Further, the current 18-month term of service needs to be extended to a minimum of two years. The 18-month service obligation creates an environment of constant personnel turnover that greatly limits the formation of cohesive, well-trained combat units. The 2nd COLAR counter-narcotics battalion illustrates this problem. This unit, composed primarily of conscripts, was formed in spring of 2000. After formation, the unit received eight weeks of Colombian basic training. Following basic training, the battalion received nearly six months of intensive training in counter-drug operations from U.S. Special Forces trainers. This training was completed in December 2000. Following holiday leaves the majority of the conscripts in this unit will have only nine months of service obligation remaining. Very few of these soldiers are likely to re-enlist due to poor pay, lack of incentives, and quality of life in the Colombian Army. Extending service obligations, at least for soldiers assigned to counter-narcotics and counter-insurgency units that receive extensive U.S. training and equipment support would help to reduce the problem of constant personnel turnover in these critical forces.

Another measure that should be adopted is an increase in the training and equipment support provided to COLAR counter-insurgency units. The current U.S. support package targets only CNP and COLAR counter-narcotics units. This aid should be expanded to include COLAR counter-guerrilla units. This could be accomplished by modifying the USSOUTHCOM Theater Engagement Plan to provide increased training assistance to COLAR counter-insurgency units, and through increased Security Assistance support (Foreign Military Sales, Foreign Military Financing Program, International Military Education and Training Program) to Colombia. More capable counter-guerrilla units

would strengthen the Colombian government's ability to regain control of its national territory and indirectly benefit drug interdiction efforts. Further efforts should also be taken to improve the professionalism of COLAR counter-narcotics and counter-guerrilla units as they are likely to conduct the majority of combat operations. These types of operations are characterized by violent, fast paced small unit actions often at night in restricted or urban terrain. Such operations demand competent junior officers and non-commissioned officers to be successful. Under the current system, COLAR non-commissioned officers are largely ineffective because most are uneducated and poorly trained. To help alleviate this situation the pay, incentives, and infrastructure of these units must be upgraded. These improvements coupled with a rigorous selection process, intensive small unit and leader training as well as adequate equipment would improve professionalism, boost morale and likely improve retention. The end result would be Colombian military units capable of controlling narcotraffickers and defeating guerrillas and paramilitary groups on the battlefield.

The U.S. could further aid in improving the professionalism of COLAR counter-narcotics and counter-guerrilla units by developing a junior leader course for officers and non-commissioned officers assigned to these units. The course should focus on small unit tactics, troop-leading procedures, air mobile and riverine tactics similar to the U.S. Army's Ranger Course and Light Infantry Leader's Course. The course should also highlight the importance of respecting human rights and the negative military and political consequences of human rights abuses. This training program could initially be executed by U.S. Special Forces personnel and later, after development of a trained cadre, the COLAR.

Another problem with the current U.S. aid package is that it does not provide adequate equipment and training for riverine operations. The COLAR counter-narcotics battalions and CNP are being equipped with a robust rotary wing capability but little in the way of riverine patrol craft. The southern and eastern portions of Colombia, where the majority of the country's cocoa is grown, is characterized by thickly vegetated terrain, few passable roads and numerous major rivers and tributaries. As a result, much of the narcotics and precursor chemicals required for processing are transported along these waterways. The FARC also uses these river systems to transport personnel, weapons and equipment. Denying the narcotraffickers' and guerrillas' freedom of movement on the waterways would greatly restrict their activities. A robust capability to patrol and control the waterways and transport troops to target areas for counter-drug and counter-guerrilla missions would greatly enhance the capability and flexibility of COLAR and CNP units. This capability, in conjunction with a strong airmobile capability would prove invaluable. U.S. Special Operations Forces or United States Marine Corps personnel could provide the training required to operate, maintain and employ these riverine platforms.

Another serious shortfall in the current U.S. effort to support Plan Colombia is the lack of oversight on Colombian counter-drug operations. The USG plans to spend \$1.3 billion to equip and train selected COLAR and CNP units but has no reliable method in place to assess the effectiveness of these units during actual operations. Assigning U.S. SOF training teams to brigade and battalion level for specially trained and equipped units could remedy this deficiency. These teams could consist of as few as two soldiers and ideally they would serve a tour of six months to one year with the unit. These trainers would assist with intelligence preparation of the battlefield, mission planning, and

rehearsals for actual operations. The teams would also monitor operations, conduct after action reviews, capture lessons learned and assist in the development of training plans to overcome identified weaknesses. These personnel would also closely monitor the performance of units with respect to human rights and ensure that civilians and collateral damage were carefully considered when planning operations. USSOUTHCOM could also task logistical personnel to provide assistance to COLAR and CNP units in the establishment of efficient maintenance, supply, and medical procedures. Logistical operations have historically been a weakness for COLAR and CNP units. An efficient supply, maintenance, and basic medical care system would improve the performance of COLAR and CNP units through an improved readiness posture. This training team approach proved successful during the U.S. involvement in El Salvador, where U.S. SOF personnel served as trainers assigned to Salvadoran brigades during that country's violent civil war. At the end of the war, a high ranking guerilla leader was reported to have said that the most damaging thing that occurred to the insurgents during the war was the assignment of American trainers to Salvadoran Brigades.¹⁷ In short, SOF and logistical training teams would provide ground truth about the operational effectiveness of COLAR and CNP units, monitor their human rights performance, and enhance their effectiveness through continued training.

The U.S. could also improve the effectiveness of its support to "Plan Colombia" by adopting a more comprehensive regional counter-drug strategy. Joint Pub 3-07.4, Joint Counterdrug Operations, states, "CD operations are designed to reduce or eliminate the supply and demand for illegal drugs. Only a comprehensive planning process at the strategic (national), operational, and tactical (regional) levels can provide the means to

reach this goal.¹⁸ USSOUTHCOM, although a supporting agency in the implementation of counter drug operations, could assist in this effort by sponsoring a regional counter-drug planning conference immediately preceding the annual USSOUTHCOM Exercise and Engagement Conference. The purpose of the conference would be to assemble representatives from the Department of State, the Office of National Drug Control Policy, Joint Interagency Task Force-East, U.S. country teams, U.S. Law Enforcement Agencies (LEA) and other U.S. agencies supporting counter drug operations to develop a regional counter-drug plan. This conference would serve to increase the awareness of current and projected counter-drug activities of all agencies in the region, provide an opportunity to establish priorities, allocate resources, improve cooperation among agencies and synchronize operations. The resulting regional plan would allow military planners to better support the national drug control strategy by tailoring the theater engagement plan to support the strategy.

USSOUTHCOM could also improve regional cooperation for counter-drug efforts among Latin American nations by refocusing the JCS directed Cabanas and Trade Winds exercises. The Cabanas exercise is a multinational exercise involving the participation of numerous South American nations and is based on a peacekeeping scenario. The Trade Winds exercise involves Caribbean nations and also focuses on a peacekeeping scenario. Both of these exercises could be modified to focus on a regional counter-drug scenario and include a combined military exercise focusing on joint and combined counter-drug tactics. They could also be expanded to include a symposium on current counter-drug issues impacting the region. This symposium should be oriented towards high-ranking military officers and civilian officials and would serve as a vehicle for addressing

regional problems related to the illegal drug trade. With the high priority on reducing the flow of drugs into the U.S. and the minimal requirement for peacekeeping operations in the USSOUTHCOM area of responsibility, these changes would better support U.S. objectives. This initiative could serve as a starting point for building consensus and cooperation for a combined regional counter-drug effort.

Criticism of U.S. Involvement in Colombia

"Some of the saddest results of our involvement in Vietnam are how resistant we have been to learn from it, and how paralyzed our national decision-making process is by the specter, however implausible, that the U.S. might become involved in another such experience.

David Passage, Former Director, Andean Affairs Section, Latin American Bureau, Department of State¹⁹

Most critics of U.S. support for "Plan Colombia" argue that increased U.S. aid to counter-drug operations in Colombia will lead to American involvement in the country's civil war and "another Vietnam." They claim that U.S. combat forces will inevitably become involved in Colombia's counter-insurgency struggle. This argument is flawed for several reasons. First, it assumes the U.S. is willing to commit large numbers of combat troops to Colombia to fight both narcotraffickers and communist insurgents. Secondly, it assumes that Colombia would request or allow such assistance. Neither of these assumptions is valid. It is extremely unlikely that the casualty averse American public would support intervention in Colombia with combat troops. Further, the Colombian government does not want a large number of foreign combat troops fighting in its territory.²⁰ These conditions will prevent U.S. involvement from escalating as it did during the Vietnam War.

The successful U.S. experience in support of El Salvador's fight against communist insurgents in the 1980's offers a more relevant model for U.S. support to Colombia. In this case the U.S. successfully assisted the Salvadoran government in defeating communist insurgents by providing trainers and equipment rather than large numbers of combat troops. This successful approach applied lessons learned from Vietnam and was based on three major premises. First, the U.S. made it clear that it was El Salvador's war, and that the war would be won or lost by Salvadorans, not Americans. Second, the U.S. agreed to train El Salvador's Armed Forces, but would not participate in combat operations, and insisted the number of trainers would be limited. Third, the U.S. used all the pressure at its disposal to compel the Salvadoran government to make significant internal reforms and improve its human rights record.²¹ As a result, U.S. involvement in El Salvador ended quite differently than our involvement in Vietnam. Although Colombia's sheer size (the size of Texas and New Mexico combined) and scope of problems is greater than El Salvador's, the same approach could serve to improve the effectiveness of U.S. support while guarding against escalation. As in El Salvador, the number of U.S. trainers could be limited and their activities restricted to non-combat roles if the political environment so demanded.

Another common criticism of U.S. support to Colombia is that high cost and long commitment will be necessary to ensure success. It is true that supporting Plan Colombia will probably be long and costly. However, the effort is very likely to cost much less than the U.S. involvement in the Balkans. The Department of Defense has spent \$8.1 billion and deployed thousands of troops to the Balkans during FY 1999 and FY 2000.²² This massive commitment is likely to continue for the near future. In contrast, aid to

Colombia over the same time period has been relatively small with less than 200 soldiers deployed at any given time. Providing support to a democratic nation in our own hemisphere and stabilizing a region that is arguably more vital to U.S. national interests should warrant at least the same level of commitment.

Conclusion

The U.S. \$1.3 billion support package for "Plan Colombia" is a positive sign of our commitment to stabilizing Colombia's faltering democracy and reducing the flow of illegal drugs into our nation. However, to have a reasonable chance of success, the support plan needs significant modification. As previously demonstrated, any effective drug interdiction efforts in Colombia, must first be preceded by the government regaining control of its sovereign territory and strengthening its civil institutions. Attempts to control criminal drug trafficking activities in the absence of a stable, secure political environment have little chance of success. U.S. policy makers should recognize that the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC), the Army of National Liberation (ELN), and right-wing paramilitary groups present the greatest obstacle to achieving democracy and stability in Colombia. Conflicts with these organizations must be resolved before any meaningful, lasting progress can be made in curtailing criminal drug trafficking. Successfully negotiating with or combating these organizations will require a more professional, capable Colombian military. U.S. support efforts should focus on assisting Colombia with developing this force. The U.S. should use the successful operations in El Salvador as a model for assisting Colombia. Assigning training teams to selected Colombian military and CNP units to facilitate training programs, assist in planning operations, and monitor respect for human rights would greatly improve the

effectiveness of U.S. support. Finally, the U.S. should develop and implement a more coherent interagency and combined regional strategy for coping with drug trafficking. Adoption of these measures would greatly improve the probability of achieving U.S. counter-drug policy objectives.

NOTES

¹ U.S. Department of State, "Congressional presentation for foreign operations, FY99", Washington, D.C., (March 1999):1317

² John P. Sweeny, "Tread cautiously in Colombia's civil war," The Heritage Foundation Backgrounder, No. 1264 (Mar 1999): 3.

³ U.S. Department of State, "United States Support for Plan Colombia," July 2000, <<http://www.state.gov/www/regions/wha/colombia/fs-000719-plancolombia.html>> [14 December 2000].

⁴ John G. Roos, "The enemy next door: Good reasons to hammer South America's drug cartels," Armed Forces Journal International, 137 (Mar 2000): 42.

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⁷ Gabriel Marcella, and Donald Schulz, "Colombia's three wars: U.S. strategy at the crossroads," Strategic Review, 28, number 1 (Winter 2000): 8.

⁸ *Ibid*, 12.

⁹ *Ibid*, 4.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 4.

¹¹ Sweeny, No. 1264, 18.

¹² Passage, v. 13, 14.

¹³ U.S. Department of State, "United States Support for Plan Colombia," July 2000, <<http://www.state.gov/www/regions/wha/colombia/fs-000719-plancolombia.html>> [14 December 2000].

¹⁴ Roos, v. 137, 42.

¹⁵ Marcella and Schulz, v. 28, 3.

¹⁶ Passage, v. 13, 10.

¹⁷ Geoffrey Lambert, Frank Pedrozo, and J.S. Roach, "Interview: Special Forces in El Salvador," Special Warfare, 6, no. 4 (October 1993): 38.

¹⁸ Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Counterdrug Operations, Joint Pub 3-07.4. (Washington, D.C. 17 February 1998), V-1

¹⁹ Passage, v. 13, 12.

²⁰ Marcella and Schulz, v. 28, 28.

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